



Gopher Tortoise

Gopherus polyphemus



The Gopher Tortoise is a terrestrial turtle with elephantine hind feet and shovel-like forefeet used for digging impressive underground burrows that can be over 40 feet long and 10 feet deep. The adult carapace (upper shell) is a dark brown or grayish-black and the plastron (lower shell) is yellowish.

Age and Size

These slow-growing reptiles may live 40-60 years in the wild. They may reach adulthood between 10-20 years of age and maturity varies by geographic region within their range. An adult shell is typically 11 inches in length and once they reach adulthood, males will develop a concave plastron toward the rear of the shell while the female's plastron will remain flat. Females will grow slightly larger than males and juvenile tortoise shells usually harden at 6-7 years of age.

Behavior

Gopher Tortoises are most active during the spring and summer months and retreat to their burrows during the winter months. They typically do not travel far from their burrows to forage and mate if they are in good quality habitat and part of a population of tortoises. They will spend time basking at or near the entrance of their burrow and will sometimes dig and use multiple burrows during the active season.

Diet

Gopher Tortoises forage primarily on low-growing herbaceous vegetation such as grasses and legumes and will occasionally eat blackberries and other seasonal fruits.

Reproduction

Gopher Tortoises may reproduce once they reach maturity between 10-20 years of age. They typically breed from April to June and will dig a small hole and lay 3-15 eggs, 6 eggs on average, on the “apron” (burrow mound) or a nearby open, sunny area during May and June. They will lay one clutch of eggs each year. Incubation period for nests is about 80-90 days and the eggs and hatchlings experience a very high rate of predation from red-imported fire ants, raccoons, armadillos, and other predators. Young tortoises may use the adult female’s burrow or dig their own burrow soon after hatching for shelter.

Habitat/Range

Gopher Tortoises occur in 3 parishes in Louisiana: Washington, Tangipahoa, and St. Tammany. They require open, upland habitats with an abundance of low-growing vegetation, sunny areas for basking and nesting, and sandy soils for digging burrows. Historically, they are associated with the Longleaf Pine Ecosystem but can be found in other open, upland forested areas or if these areas are unsuitable, pipeline and powerline right-of-ways, pastures, and roadsides may also be used. Prescribed fire, along with other restoration activities, is critical to maintaining the open, diverse habitat that tortoises and other species, both game and non-game, require for long-term survival and viability.

What You Can Do To Help

Please do not move Gopher Tortoises that are found in their natural habitat. If moved, tortoises will wander extensively trying to find their burrow or their “home” putting them in harm’s way. If found on a roadway within their natural habitat, tortoises can be moved across the roadway in the direction they were heading only if it safe to do so.

Educate your family and friends about Louisiana’s Gopher Tortoises and help us to conserve this native and unique species.

Tortoise Burrow



Reporting a Tortoise or Burrow Sighting

If a tortoise is found outside of their native range and natural habitat in Louisiana, please retrieve the tortoise and report it immediately to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. If you are a landowner and would like information on financial and technical assistance with habitat restoration on your property please contact LDWF.

LDWF Headquarters:

2000 Quail Drive | Baton Rouge, LA 70808

LDWF Natural Heritage Program:

Keri Lejeune, LDWF-LNHP Endangered Species Biologist | klejeune@wlf.la.gov | 337-735-8676

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